Contemporary World

Syllabus

Required Texts

* Sijie, Dai, Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress
* Seierstad, Asne, The Bookseller of Kabul
* Khadra, Yasmina, The Attack
* Soyinka, Wole, Ake
* Fletcher, Martin, Breaking News
* Farber, Samuel, The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered
* E-reserve and online readings to be identified in the individual lessons.

Course Requirements and Procedures

The course has fifteen required lessons. You will be expected to read the text prepared for each lesson by the professors. As a complement to this reading, there will be original source material and often some Web sites for you to visit and study. Links will be provided throughout the lesson pages as necessary.

To begin your course work, click on “Lesson 1” from the navigation bar once you have read this home page and received all your materials. This will take you to the first lesson. You must complete the lessons in order. Each lesson will have instructions on how to proceed. You may also e-mail your instructor any time with questions, comments, or problems.

Assignments

You will have an assignment to complete for most lessons. Some of these will be online discussions, and others will be short papers for you to submit through the Blackboard program.

Discussions will focus on question(s) which will be provided in the Assignment page at the end of the lessons. Students will be divided into groups. Each group will debate the question(s) and try to explore the members’ views. (An agreement to disagree is an option.) Each student should post at least one comment based on the material assigned and at least one response to the postings by other students. One student, in rotation, will summarize the conclusions. Each group’s discussion will be posted under that group’s section on the Group Discussion board. The summaries, however, will be posted on the general Discussion Board, so that conclusions may be shared with the entire class. The professor will read all comments, correct factual mistakes, and comment briefly on the
cogency of the arguments presented. DUE TO THE FLUID NATURE OF THESE ASSIGNMENTS, NO POSTINGS OR RESPONSES WILL BE ACCEPTED AFTER THE WEEK FOR WHICH THE DISCUSSION IS SCHEDULED.

Papers will be short (about three pages) and should examine the question(s) raised in the appropriate Assignment page. These questions, typically, will look at the validity of the source as well as what we can learn from it. Your remarks should be pointed to the question(s) asked; book reviews or general essays are not acceptable. LATE PAPERS WILL BE PENALIZED FIVE POINTS FOR EACH WEEK LATE.

All essays and assignments will be graded on the basis of the following criteria:

1. **Level of analysis/argumentation.** You must present a thoughtful argument and interpretation, not a mere summary of facts. (Note: it does not matter which side of an issue you argue, rather how well or how poorly you make the argument.)

2. **Use of evidence.** The material you select to support your thesis must be relevant.

3. **Clarity of communication.** You must present the evidence and express your argument in a clear, comprehensible manner.

You should also read **Guidelines for Paper Assignments** below. They give you an idea how to approach the paper assignments and discussion questions. Read through this page before doing the first paper assignment. You should also refer to it as you work on each of your assignments.

**Grading and Papers**

Your work will be evaluated as follows:

A = excellent performance overall
B = above average overall, or excellent on some aspects tempered by flaws in others
C = passing, but unacceptable in a graduate course
D = below average overall performance.

Your work will be given the following weight:

- 6 unit papers worth 12 points each: 72 points
- 7 discussions, 4 points each, total of: 28 points
- Total: 100 points

**Guidelines for Paper Assignments**

This brief set of guidelines explains how to approach the essay assignments for the course. First, always keep in mind that the study of history depends heavily on interpretation. The old saying about history being merely the memorization of facts and dates is mistaken. It is the *interpretation* of the past; any two people can take the same set of facts and dates and come up with entirely different conclusions.
This does not mean that any interpretation is as good as any other. Professional historians differ from journalists, polemicists, propagandists, and writers of fiction because they work hard at weighing the evidence and try to come as close as is humanly possible to “what actually happened.”

On the paper assignments for this course, you should be the historian: take the information given to you in the notes and the readings and shape your own interpretation of the history of the world since 1945. Carrying out this task requires skills that no one is born with but that everyone can master. It involves synthesizing broad amounts of material, deciding which is most important, using it to develop your own interpretation, and presenting that point of view in a clearly written form. Remember that you are not only obligated to expose lies and distortions. The selection of material which you make is crucial to the trustworthiness of your narrative. You must explain and rebut arguments which go against your interpretation; a slanted or one-sided account may be great politics, but it is bad history.

In the opening paragraph, tell the topic you will be discussing and spell out your point of view on that issue in a clear thesis statement. Think of this crucial part of your essay as the answer to the question being asked. For the first paper, a thesis statement might read:

“In this essay, I will discuss the main factors behind President Truman’s decision to bomb Japan and show that this was the right decision to make.”

OR

“In this essay, I will discuss the main factors behind President Truman’s decision to bomb Japan and show that it was unnecessary and thus the wrong decision.”

These are very different approaches to the same question, and neither is right or wrong, but both thesis statements show how you intend to approach the question and what argument you will make in the paper. Each point you raise in the body of the paper should support your thesis statement. This is a key part of being an historian: choosing from the evidence at hand to support an interpretation of an issue. Also, keep the counter arguments in mind, responding when appropriate and explaining why you are not convinced.

The conclusion should briefly summarize the argument made in the essay, but should also go one step further and consider the implications of what your essay shows. This may not be entirely clear, so think about it again with the first assignment in mind. The decision to use atomic weapons began the nuclear arms race and the issue of nuclear proliferation that remains a problem to this day. The bomb also ushered in a new scientific era with peaceful uses of nuclear technology, and many have argued that the use of the bomb assured a period of relative peace between the superpowers because neither side was likely to unleash such a destructive force again. On an entirely different note, you could address the broader debate of whether the bomb was the first shot of the Cold War. You might also approach the issue of the bomb from a moral point of view, considering, as have many, whether its use against Japan was racially motivated. There are, in short, a number of broader implications one could touch on in a conclusion, depending upon
which way the argument in the essay develops.

Writing

It is an important skill to be able to develop a concise logical argument. Consider the difference between these sentences:

1. The Japanese, weary and exhausted as a nation after four years of brutal fighting with the Western allies, were on the brink of complete and total collapse by August 1945.
2. By August 1945, the Japanese were ready for surrender.

Though well written, the first sentence is wordy. Avoid such constructions in your essays because you need the space. Every word of the paper should contribute to the argument being developed. The best way to weed out wordy phrases is to do multiple drafts, tightening up the writing each time. Have someone read the second draft and point out anything unclear. Read a subsequent draft aloud to catch awkward sentences. Plan ahead so you can do several drafts, setting the essay aside for a while between readings.

Citations

You are expected to draw on material from the course for the assignments and cite sources in your papers. Identify them in parenthesis in the text of the paper, like this: (Fussell, page 23). You need not provide a bibliography for assigned readings. If you draw on outside material, something you are welcome but not required to do, cite those sources in parenthesis also but provide a bibliography. Cite an Internet source by giving the title of the Web page, the URL (Web address), and the date you visited the site. Provide a printed copy of the footnoted page. Be careful not to plagiarize material by using someone else’s argument or interpretation without citing that source.